

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks Following a Meeting With President Ricardo Martinelli Berrocal of Panama

April 28, 2011

President Obama. Well, I want to welcome President Martinelli to the Oval Office, to the White House. As I think all of you know, the relationship between the United States and Panama is a historical relationship and a strong friendship that isn't just at the government level, but it is the person-to-person level.

Obviously, there are a lot of Panamanian Americans who live here. At the same time, President Martinelli was just informing me that 7 percent of the Panamanian population is from the United States. And so that constant contact between people, I think, is part of what has made us such strong friends and allies for generations.

Also, obviously, we share an interest in baseball. And if, Mr. President, you have somebody who's the next Mariano Rivera, make sure they go to the Chicago White Sox.

President Martinelli. The White Sox, not the Yankees. *[Laughter]*

President Obama. Not the Yankees—they've had enough. In building on that friendship, we've discussed a wide range of issues in our meeting today. Obviously, one of the most important ones is how do we grow the economies of both countries. And in that regard, we are very pleased by the progress that we've made in moving forward a U.S.-Panamanian free trade agreement.

Thanks to the leadership of President Martinelli, there have been a range of significant reforms in banking and taxation in Panama. And we are confident now that a free trade agreement would be good for our country, would create jobs here in the United States, open up new markets with potential for billions of dollars of cross-border trade. We think it would be also very good for Panama and allow additional economic exchanges between our two countries.

So my expectation is, is that as part of a broader trade package that we're going to be presenting to Congress, that we're going to be able to get this done. And I want to thank again President Martinelli for his leadership on this issue.

We also discussed security in the region. We have had very close cooperation between our two Governments on issues of drug interdiction and dealing with the constant problem of the drug trade in Central America. And Panama has been one of the leaders that we've worked with in trying to roll back the incursion of the drug cartels into the region.

I know President Martinelli is greatly committed to this issue, and we discussed how we could cooperate together not only in the interdiction side, but also in helping other countries in the region to build up their capacity. And we think that Panama is going to be critical to the Central American Security Partnership that I've announced previously.

We also discussed some of the broader issues related to the region. We both agreed that the more we can do to showcase the success of free markets, commitments to democracy, human rights, individual liberties, freedom of the press, the more that we are highlighting those shared values between our two countries, the more successful the people of the region will be.

And so, again, I just want to say to President Martinelli, thank you for your visit; thank you for your friendship; thank you for your leadership. The American people know that we have a great friend in the people of Panama, and we hope that the people of Panama know that they have a great friend in the United States of America.

President Martinelli. Thank you.

President Obama. Thank you so much. Thank you.

President Martinelli. Well, thank you very much. Thank you, President Obama. This has been a very fruitful meeting for Panama and the United States.

As you all know, we—Panama has completed all the necessary steps in order to have a free trade agreement with the U.S. This new agreement will bring jobs for both countries. It will meet—it will also bring growth for the United States and for Panama.

The United States is Panama's main and biggest ally, and we have always looked to the United States as our main supplier of many goods and services.

At the same time, we also spoke about the security issues. And Panama, as you all know, is the first frontier to the—in Central America to the drug-producing countries. And being Panama successful makes a U.S. much safer in crime and drugs in all the cities of the United States—the more drugs that we catch, the less amount of drugs that will come to the United States.

We have a—we are going to work very closely with the United States in—on security and on commerce, because this is the only way that we can expand growth in both of our economies, expand trade, expand jobs. And, at the same time, this will bring better quality of life to the citizens—all the citizens of the U.S. and of Panama.

President Obama. Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you very much.

President Martinelli. Mr. President, thank you very much.

President Obama. Thank you. Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:26 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Mariano Rivera, pitcher, New York Yankees.

Categories: Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Panama, President Martinelli.

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